

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

April 13, 2004

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Crestwood School – A Community of Critical Thinkers

ORIGINATOR: L. Ungeran, Principal Crestwood School

RESOURCE

STAFF: Anne Jensen, Sheri Long, Judith Olesen, Debbie Richards, Mary Linn Sage, Lindy Thompson

INFORMATION

Crestwood School, located in west Edmonton, serves a student population of 454 students in Grades K-9. It is a district site for the junior high Academic Alternative and Gifted and Talented Programs. There are two classes of Academic Alternative and one class of Gifted and Talented for each grade. The elementary grades provide regular programming for students living in the neighbourhood.

Identification of our instructional focus began in spring 2001. During that school year, teachers engaged in extensive discussion of our achievement test results. Particular attention was given to steps that might lead to improvement. When we began pinpointing specific skills that would benefit all students, it quickly became evident that the skills for higher order thinking would be of most benefit to our students. The following statement, developed during the 2001-2002 school year, expresses our focus:

The Instructional Focus at Crestwood School is to enhance the critical thinking skills of all students as measured by School Developed Assessments and Provincial Achievement and Highest Level of Achievement tests.

Three needs were immediately apparent: we needed to develop a clearer understanding of what it means to be a critical thinker, identify strategies to improve students' ability to think critically, and determine a process to measure progress.

In collaborative teams, teachers discussed how best to proceed. We identified practices that we were already using and compared these with the research. Based upon this discussion we determined that we should focus on asking better questions as learners and as teachers.

Staff identified a framework for asking questions that increased student participation and accountability. This framework in its simplest form is referred to as Think-Pair-Share. We incorporated a hierarchy for asking questions at higher levels. We also decided to use graphic organizers as another way to improve questioning. Specifically, one that we use is referred to as K-W-L. Students or teachers when approaching a new concept identify first what they know about the concept (the K), then what they want to know about it (the W).

The lesson on the new concept is then taught and having students identify what was learned brings on closure (the L). Students then identify any new questions they have.

We have identified a number of other strategies. We are currently using a critical thinking lesson plan model that incorporates the idea of planning lessons so that students begin with a critical thinking question, identify relevant background knowledge, use process for thinking along with a criteria for judgment when finally answering the critical question. As well, all of our junior high classes now have an agenda check at the end of each day to ensure that students record and understand their homework assignments.

Our Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) discussed the type of measures that would be useful in assessing student performance levels for critical thinking. Achievement test scores and HLATs were an obvious selection. However, these were external measures, and we wanted to establish internal targets and measures. After examining various possibilities, we decided to use the K-W-L graphic organizer along with a performance rubric to help us assess the level and quality of questions that students were asking. At three different times during the year teachers at all grade levels in the elementary and all subject areas in the junior high give the students a new learning task where their level of questioning is assessed using the K-W-L and the rubric. This provides achievement data for analysis. Our continuing challenge is to improve our measure and the meaningfulness of the data. We want the data to direct teaching practice and student learning. Our recent work on 'Assessment For Learning' is providing us with good direction in this area.

While our internal measure is not yet conclusive, our external measures show that our students have made achievement gains over the past three years. These gains can be attributed in large part to an environment focused on student success and staff development, with specific attention to critical thinking. We recognize that effective implementation of an instructional focus requires attention to a number of other matters. At Crestwood, implementation of our critical thinking focus is built on a base of staff collaboration, support from AISI funding and development of positive attitudes for learning. We meet in collaborative work teams two times per month. At these meetings we look at student work, do professional development and review achievement data. Our ILT meets regularly once per month to plan the work of the collaborative teams and to set direction for the school. Our collaborative teams and our ILT also work closely with Consulting Services and we feel strongly that the serious attention and professional attitude of staff towards changing practice is making a difference in the learning of our students.